III

'A New Stranger has come'

In these words the father's mother announced from the door of the hut that a child had been born. From inside the hut the women assisting the mother at the time of delivery had given a single cry if it was a boy and two cries for a girl. If the birth had been delayed till late afternoon towards sunset, the women in the hut said to the mother, if it was a boy: 'See the baby has been awaiting the return of the cattle, because it is he who will tend the cattle.' 844 851

The new baby was at first regarded as a stranger, born by a woman who had herself come to the village as a stranger when she married. In later years, when speaking of his parents, the child would say: 'X is my father, and I am of the womb of A, and G and H they are my brother and my sister of one womb.' This particularization of a full brother and sister was used to correct the extended use of the kinship terms, and also to convey the idea that having been born from the womb of one woman gave children a special relationship important in Ngoni thinking. 851 593 [591] [601]

Preparation for birth

When an Ngoni wife was aware that she was pregnant she did not say anything to her husband, and indeed endeavoured to conceal her condition from him as long as possible, continuing the normal sleeping arrangements and intercourse. Ngoni women liked to assert their authority and ascendancy on those occasions, and therefore excluded the men from knowledge of the coming event and from all preparations for it. The senior women used to say, 'Men are 843 593 562

3: Read E-5 (1935-1939)1960
FR5 Ngoni FR5

843 593 562 little children. They are not able to hear those things which belong to pregnancy.' The men on their part accepted the role of being ignorant of what was coming, though they were generally aware of it. It was an elaborate piece of role-playing, standardized by custom, emphasizing the separation of the men's and women's worlds in Ngoni life, and giving control and authority into the experienced hands of the senior women.

843 606 572 The Ngoni culture pattern forbade the wife to tell her mother-in-law herself about her condition. She had, as so often in the Ngoni pattern, to approach first a friend who was her confidante, who might be another young wife or a helper in the household. This friend had to tell her mother-in-law, the future paternal grandmother of the baby, who was destined to play a big part in the child's upbringing.

During the months of pregnancy a Ngoni woman carried on with her normal work in the household, including cooking for her husband. If she feared a miscarriage, and suffered from what was called 'a shaking inside', she stayed quietly in the hut, and, saying that she had a headache, asked her husband to call her friend. Then the friend told the mother-in-law who sent for a 'doctor' to bring medicines 'to make the inside not shake'. A young Ngoni woman did not expect

843 152 to have miscarriages, and feared that her husband's relatives would blame her home for not giving her enough food before marriage to make her strong and healthy in childbearing.

The fear of invidious comparisons with her own home and upbringing also operated when the wife felt herself near to labour. She would keep on working up to the last minute, for if she told her friend that her time was come, and the friend summoned the senior women, they came to examine her. Should they find on examination that she was not about to deliver, they looked at her and said, 'What are you afraid of? Did you call us for fear?' The young wife was ashamed of being thought fearful, both for her own reputation and

3: Read E-5 (1935-1939) 1960
FR5 Ngoni FR5

because it was implied that her family had not given her good instruction and advice before marriage. 843 152

The birth of the child

When the senior women were satisfied that labour was about to begin, they took charge of all the preparations. They first sent out of the hut all the things belonging to the husband, his clothes, axes, spears, shields, and all the good mats, pots and baskets. Only old mats and clothes and pots were used during labour, and the hut was henceforth unclean and forbidden to the husband and to all males. The mother-in-law directed operations, with the help of her co-wives, the wives of her husband's brothers, widowed sisters of her husband, and some of the wives of the younger generation. The women who took an active part in the actual delivery were the older ones, but several younger women came to assist, or look on, and to encourage the young wife. 844 [422] [846]

She was made to sit on a mat leaning back against the knees of another woman, and the experienced 'midwives' were in front to receive the child in their hands. She was told to bear down and sometimes given a bark rope tied to the rafters to pull on. Though she might be in great pain, she was not expected to cry out or even to groan. The older women talked to her encouragingly, and wiped her face, or gave her a little water to drink. After the birth, the woman knelt forward leaning on her hands until the placenta was born. It was buried in a hole, in the floor at the back of the hut on the women's side.

The baby was washed by a senior woman and oiled with castor oil. The cord was tied with thread and the baby was given very thin gruel made of finger millet fried and ground. This was intended to act as a purgative to get rid of the mucus in the stomach. After this had been ejected, a tiny bit of the sour milk curds was put in the baby's mouth. [858]

The mother was washed and covered with a cloth and left to rest, while the women folded up the delivery mat

4: Barnes E-5 (1946-1949)1951 FR5 Ngoni FR5
Mpezeni

necessary to take formal action to restore harmony. Husband and wife still remain separate persons, separated socially by their distinct roles. Yet they are bound together by economic ties, by symbolic procedures, and by mystical connexion.

The sexual rights and obligations of husband and wife in each other are not symmetrical. A man has exclusive sexual rights over his wife, but a woman cannot gain exclusive sexual rights over her husband. Her husband can take other wives, or commit adultery, and she has no ground in law for complaint unless at the same time he neglects her. The most she can do is to make life so unpleasant for him that rather than face her anger he decides to sleep with her alone. Mystical procedures are available to both man and wife, and while a husband may use medicines to safeguard that which is his by right, a wife uses medicines to augment her other sanctions, such as the threat of not cooking food for her husband or of running away to her relatives. There is one class of medicines [6] which a man can administer to his wife by cicatrization which it is believed will cause any lover of the woman to die. Another magical procedure is stated to prevent the lover from withdrawing after coitus, so that the adulterous pair will have to reveal themselves to their neighbours in order to gain medical assistance. These medicines are said to be favoured by men going off to Southern Rhodesia without their wives. It is difficult to tell to what extent they are actually administered, but the belief in their efficacy is wide-spread, and people would comment that so-and-so who was ill had become so because he had slept with a woman doctored in this way, and that the scars on such-and-such a woman were made when her husband had given her this sort of medicine. On the other hand a woman may use medicine [7] to prevent her husband from copulating with anyone else, and there are other medicines which act as love charms or which encourage the husband to stay at home at night.[8] The beliefs about difficult labour and *mdulo*[9] also have a stabilizing effect in that the man may fear for the fate of his child and for that reason be faithful to his wife while she is pregnant. On the other hand it is believed that a rejected lover can give medicine [10] to a woman who resists his approaches, so that she will die or have difficulties in childbirth. The only way for a woman to avoid this hazard is to live demurely and not to excite the attention of other men.

If a woman believes that her husband is committing adultery with

[6] Known as *lukuukko*. There are at least four varieties of this, associated with different maladies all of which are fatal to the adulterer. Cf. *lukuuko* in Colson, *Marriage among the Plateau Tonga* (Rhodes-Livingstone Papers—forthcoming).

[7] *Ndamanga*. See below, p. 86.

[8] E.g., medicine made from the house lizard (*mbololiko*) and the domesticated cat, because these animals are always in the house and do not wander about.

[9] See below, p. 66.

[10] *Kalamatila*, from the name of the species of frog from which it is made.

4: Barnes E-5 (1946-1949)1951 FR5 Ngoni FR5
Mpezeni

uniting a married couple are weak as compared with say, the Bemba.[82] The bride is anointed with gall, and carries the gall bladder in her hair back to her own village as a sign that she has been through the marriage ceremony and has been instructed in her wifely duties by her husband's kinsfolk and neighbours. But the husband himself is usually not there, 'that day is not his work', and I once saw a man quietly drinking on one side of the village while his bride was being anointed on the other. In general it is not until much later that husband and wife appear together in ceremonial situations. The personal association of husband and wife begins in darkness and the privacy of the hut. Later the wife will have validated her status as a married woman, and can appear as such in public alongside her husband without embarrassment.

It is when a woman is pregnant that her husband's actions are most liable to affect her mystically. In general a man may commit adultery and his wife has no case against him; but when she is pregnant he is under a moral obligation to sleep only with her and, if he is a polygynist, with his other wives. His adultery endangers her life, for it is believed that her labour will be difficult and she or the child may die. The pregnant woman is in mortal danger if she herself commits adultery and there is a common obligation of fidelity on both man and wife throughout pregnancy, accompanied in the eyes of some people by a positive obligation to copulate together so that the foetus may grow strong in the womb. When labour proves difficult, the midwife calls on the husband to confess the adulteries he committed while his wife was pregnant so that the child can be born. She may also tell the woman to confess.[83] If the child is born dead, the woman's relatives begin to suspect that the man confessed only some of his adulteries and concealed others, thereby killing the child. We have already noted that if the woman dies the husband must offer a beast to her kinsfolk (pp. 39f).

From the birth of the child until its umbilical cord has fallen off and it has been doctored, the husband should not sleep with anyone at all, not even with his other wives. He can resume sexual relations with them after the cord has fallen but he does not sleep with the mother of the child until about three months after the birth, when he has ritual intercourse with her and the child is again doctored. While the infant is sleeping the husband has *coitus interruptus* with its mother and allows his semen to fall on her thighs. She smears the semen over her thighs and then takes up the child and gives it to her husband, who rests it on his hips. After a moment he hands the infant back to his wife who also rests it on her hips. The child is then put back to sleep on the mat beside the couple. This ritual intercourse is obligatory in that if it is omitted it is believed the child

[82] Cf. Richards, op. cit., p. 113.
[83] Cf. Rattray, op. cit., p. 105, and H. F. Barnes, 'The birth of a Ngoni child', *Man*, xlix (1949), p. 89.

4: Barnes E-5 (1946-1949)1951 FR5 Ngoni FR5
Mpezeni

584 or friends. If the man is away working or in the Army he may make his proposal by letter. When agreement has been reached negotiations can proceed although they are carried on as if there had been no prior agreement and the proposal was entirely a new one.

A man tells his eldest brother of his intention to marry, or, if he is the eldest son, he may approach his father direct. He does not [593] speak to his mother about this matter, for a man does not confide in his mother about anything connected with sex, but she is told [603] of his intention by her husband. A man ought to tell his grandmother at an early stage, particularly the grandmother who reared him. A woman tells her sisters and her grandmother, and her eldest sister will tell her eldest brother. The man's father or eldest brother may decide on who shall act as intermediaries in the matchmaking, or else the man may himself ask important people in the village to act. There is no definite rule as to who they should be, and either men or women or both may make up the party. Usually two or three people go, and a man will try and choose people who are reliable and sober and tactful. Marriage intermediaries do not have the same important responsibilities for the marriage as do the marriage [191] sureties (or witnesses) among the Nyanja and Yao although they are known by the same term.[1] The intermediaries go to the woman's village and consult her senior relatives. Traditionally they should go to the woman's grandmother, either her father's mother or her mother's mother, depending on who lives in the village and who is the more important. They tell her that they have heard that such-and-such a marriage has been contemplated. The girl's grandmother tells the girl's father that the intermediaries have come, and if nothing has arisen to jeopardize the marriage, the visiting party are told that all is well and that they must come back again. They return to their own village, and the next day, or the next week if it is a long way to walk, they go again, bringing with them a gift or sometimes the legalization payment. The gift or money is handed to the [583] person leading the negotiations on the woman's side who passes it on to the woman's father. Arrangements are made about the gall bladder ceremony and a date fixed. The intermediaries then go back to their village.

585 At the gall bladder ceremony the bride receives formal advice [591] from her affines and the people in their village. Shortly afterwards she begins to live with her husband in either his or her village. If they live virilocally she does not at first cook for her husband, but the couple rely on food prepared by his other wives or his mother or [593] grandmother. It may be up to a year later that the woman first cooks for her husband and husband's father, the latter commenting 843 on her cooking. When she first becomes pregnant she is anointed by her husband's grandmother, and goes with a young girl from her husband's kinsfolk to announce her pregnancy to her own kin.

[1] *Nkhoswe.*

4: Barnes E-5 (1946-1949)1951 FR5 Ngoni FR5
Mpezeni

606 583 159

two groups of relatives. In the partial destruction of the father-in-law's crop by the man's friends, the latent hostility between the two groups is canalized into a form that is just socially acceptable. In the later stages of hoeing the men and women in the party act wildly, dance round and round anyone who tries to interfere with them and throw earth all over them. At first all contact between the father-in-law and the leader of the party is through intermediaries, and if all goes well, and there is no crisis, the father-in-law will always remain in the background. But with rising tempers the tension increases, and the father-in-law may himself go to cajole and threaten the party. When they do decide to stop and go into the village, an attempt is made to establish peaceful relations again, and the leader of the party begins to protest that they never really intended holding out for such a large present, that they knew it was getting dark and that they could not hoe at night. They settle down to drink the beer provided by the father-in-law and in the morning go back to their own village. It is significant that the man himself cannot be the leader of the party, so that he does not come into direct contact with his father-in-law. He shelters behind the party leader, so that the chances of an open breach between him and his father-in-law are lessened.

The formalized expression of hostility, which is a feature of many Ngoni ceremonials,[18] appears most clearly in marriage in the custom of the hoeing party, but is present in some other situations, as in the instruction of the bride at the gall bladder ceremony, when she is sometimes told she has a bad character, is mean and deceitful. Even the carrying of beer can be used to express hostility, as is indicated by Reuben's remark towards the end of his son-in-law's hoeing party, that he would tell his wife to brew beer and send it to his son-in-law's village, where the women bringing beer would demand a present even greater than the one demanded by the leader of the hoers.[19]

842 844

Men and women wish their daughters to bear children, and are reluctant to marry them to impotent men. Yet childbirth is hazardous, and a woman may die in labour because of her adultery or the adultery of her husband. It is important, therefore, that a woman's parents should be informed whenever she becomes pregnant, lest the woman die and her parents hear of her death without being forewarned of the danger. It is not sufficient that the woman's parents should hear from others that their daughter is pregnant. She must go to them on a special visit to tell them the news herself. This formal notification takes place every time she is pregnant, but if, when she becomes pregnant for the first time, she is living in

843

[18] For another example, see the installation of the headman's deputy described in Gluckman, Mitchell and Barnes, 'The village headman in British Central Africa', *Africa*, xix (1949), pp. 100-108.

[19] See Appendix III, p. 131.

4: Barnes E-5 (1946-1949)1951 FR5 Ngoni FR5
Mpezeni

her husband's village, the occasion must be recognized in a more elaborate manner. Her husband or his relatives buy her a new cloth. Wearing this cloth she stands at the door of her husband's hut, and is undressed by her husband's grandmother. The old woman rubs castor oil on her abdomen and dresses her again. A small girl from her husband's kin goes with her to her own village, and their arrival there, with the woman dressed in her new cloth, indicates formally to her parents that she is pregnant. They stay at the woman's village for about a week, and then return to her husband's village.[14] Her parents have thus been made socially aware of her pregnancy, and the man can legitimately look to them for help if she becomes ill or fractious.

If the woman does die in childbirth, her husband has to offer a beast to her parents even though they were told of her pregnancy.[15] The husband may confess to adultery when called upon to do so by the midwife, but this does not absolve him from the obligation to pay the beast. Confession absolves him from the charge of having caused the death of his wife by his careless behaviour, but he must still recompense his parents-in-law for the death of their daughter. It is recognized that a woman may die in childbirth despite the absence of adultery during pregnancy or despite full confession of adultery by both the woman and her husband. She dies just because God lets her die, and not because of any human misconduct. Yet she reaches the situation in which there is the danger of death because of her position as the wife of her husband. It is the 'work' of married women to bear children, and it is the 'work' of the husband if his wife dies in childbirth to offer a beast to her parents so that they may mourn their daughter.

5. Quarrels

We see then that a woman is not severed utterly from her own group when she marries, but that her kinsfolk retain an interest in her welfare and have certain rights in her and in her husband. The recognition of these rights by their son-in-law increases his esteem in their eyes, and enables him to appeal to them with confidence when he needs their support. The common interest of all is in the successful maintenance of the marriage, and the mutual recognition of rights and fulfilment of obligations consolidate the social relationships established between people related by marriage. Quarrels threaten the continued existence of the marriage, and it is therefore in the common interest that they should be settled as expeditiously as possible. The intervention of affines in a personal quarrel between husband and wife is characteristic of a system in which most neighbours are kinsfolk and in which the spatial concentration of people into compact villages, where abuse shouted at one

[14] This ceremony is called *ngayi*, which means 'breast-cloth' in Nsenga.
[15] See above, pp. 391.

4: Barnes E-5 (1946-1949)1951 FR5 Ngoni FR5
Mpezeni

a faithful woman whose husband stays away many years does not bear children, but they do not condone infidelity. The prolonged absence of men which leads to this unsatisfactory situation is seen as part of the disruption of the old order by the coming of the Whites. It is they who are responsible, both for the lack of children in marriages where the woman is faithful and for the occurrence of adultery in marriages where she is not. The virtue of bearing children and the virtue of fidelity are values in conflict and the Ngoni see only one solution, the ending of labour migration. This conflict appears with particular force when a man goes away leaving his wife pregnant. This action is in itself hazardous, for the man will not be there at the time of birth to confess his adultery, yet men do go away knowing their wives are pregnant. If a live child is born, it must be protected by the rite of 'taking up the child'.[1] If this is neglected the child may die, and it is in the interests therefore of the man's relatives as well as the woman's that it should be performed. The only consistent line of action is to ensure that the medicines which can be used as a substitute for the rite are available to the woman. These medicines are expensive, and relatives may be reluctant to find the money for them, particularly as the whole procedure is under the ban of the missions. The only other solution is for the woman to take a lover with whom she performs the rite. If they are caught, the excuse that they were sleeping together merely for 'taking up the child' is not accepted. Here the same conflict and the same attitude are seen as when a woman has an impotent husband.[2] To achieve a desirable end the woman must commit adultery; but woe betide her if she is caught in the act.

There is an important difference between the way in which the kinsfolk act at the level of village discussion and their behaviour later when matters are referred to the court. In the village they are fairly free to act without reference to the absent husband. They can give advice and can attempt to enforce mutually agreed damage payments of chicken, acting in the light of their opinion of what is in their own interest and in the general interest of their kinsman. They cannot deal in this way with divorce or with large damages for adultery. These matters must be referred to the court and here much more deliberate attention is paid to the wishes of the absent man. If a case of adultery is brought by the man's kin, the court enquires about the wishes of the husband in the matter. The husband's kin must produce a letter from him authorizing them to proceed against his wife and he must say in the letter whether he wishes to divorce her or merely to claim damages for adultery. The case is usually adjourned for three to six months while this is done. A woman who pleads for divorce on the ground of her husband's desertion is similarly told to write to him informing him

[1] See above, pp. 48f.
[2] See above, p. 34.

4: Barnes E-5 (1946-1949)1951 FR5 Ngoni FR5
Mpezeni

833 Sexual intercourse is the critical activity of marriage. Within the marriage bond it is not merely permitted, it is right and proper and positively sanctioned. All intercourse is dangerous, whether marital or not, and indeed it is perhaps the licit social significance of marital intercourse that leads to the attribution of mystical 843 significance. While a woman is pregnant, her husband can and indeed should sleep with her and with her co-wives, for it is not her husband's mere copulation with others that endangers her child, but frivolous and illicit intercourse with the wife of another or with some woman he has no intention of marrying. The moral code supports the social order, and the infant is born live into a righteous and well-regulated family. Otherwise it will not be born, or be born dead. Thus runs the belief.

5. Christian marriage

794 581 We have noted that, whatever were the intentions of the framers of the 1903 Regulations, Christian marriage ceremonies do not now have any legal significance, either in the Administration's courts or in the Native Courts. They are, however, significant in the eyes of the missions concerned, and sanctions are employed to ensure that all Christians are married in church. Marriages usually take place at the mission itself and there is some sort of preparation beforehand to verify that the couple concerned are aware of the religious implications of the marriage. Important people are sometimes married in a village church and the ceremony is attended by many people. These rites, both at the mission and in the village, involve the local groups of Christians and serve to integrate the members. The barriers against marriage outside the sectarian group might under some conditions lead to Christian or even sectarian endogamy but among the Ngoni this has not taken place. If a couple are anxious to marry and cannot by reason of a religious disparity, the pagan will usually join the church and then proceed to marriage as soon as the rules of the denomination permit. After marriage, a number then cease active participation in the affairs of the church, although they usually continue to regard themselves and are regarded as Christians. The fairly rapid growth of Christianity in the last fifty years makes it impossible to tell as yet whether an endogamous community will be formed. In any case, the Christian community stretches like the rest of Ngoni society to the Copperbelt and the towns of Southern Rhodesia, and there are facilities for Christian labour migrants who wish to marry Christian girls in the towns.

799 [847] The missions have attacked polygyny, the inheritance of widows, the ceremony of 'taking up the child', belief in *mdulo* and pre-marital copulation. In addition, the Dutch Reformed Church Mission has opposed the drinking of beer, and in theory but not as yet in practice, payment of bridewealth. The prohibition on the drinking of beer has led to the exchange of gifts of cooked food between the two sides in the various ceremonies of marriage, without making any important difference to their content and meaning. The missions have had

6:Rattray E, G-5 (ca. 1900) 1907 FR5 Ngoni FR5

will finish the ceremony [that the relish may be given out]. Should the girl, before she came to maturity, not have been betrothed to any man, the matrons tell her she must go to some lover; this is known as "chigango." In the evening she takes her cooking pot and relish and goes to the quarters of the young unmarried men, who for the night sleep somewhere else. In the morning the girl goes back to the *Kuka* hut.

V

THE BIRTH OF A CHILD

I. When a woman becomes pregnant, the matrons of the village tell the husband "he must now no longer cohabit with her." If the man have another wife he goes off to her house. When the time draws near for the woman's accouchement, she bids her husband leave her. He goes to one of the village matrons and tells her, "My wife is very ill." Then old women go to the hut and begin to take out all the cooking utensils and household goods. Should the woman have difficulty in giving birth the old women bid her confess, saying, "Speak, child, lest you die; who committed adultery with you?" Should she have been faithless she confesses, saying, "I sinned with so and so." The matrons hide such confessions. When she is safely delivered they bathe the infant, then one old woman goes off to tell the husband, "Your wife is well." Perhaps the woman has given birth to a male child, then she tells him, "You have seen a knobkerry."